

THE
URINE
DANCE

BOURKE

1885

NOT FOR GENERAL PERUSAL.

THE URINE DANCE
OF THE
ZUNI INDIANS OF NEW MEXICO,

BY

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FROM THE ETHNOLOGICAL NOTES COLLECTED BY HIM

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF

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With the author's compliments.

THE URINE DANCE OF THE ZUNIS.

By JOHN G. BOURKE, Captain, Third Cavalry, U. S. Army.

On the evening of November 17, 1881, during my stay in the village of Zuni, New Mexico, the *Nehue-Cue*, one of the secret orders of the Zunis, sent word to Mr. F. Cushing (whose guest I was) that they would do us the unusual honor of coming to our house to give us one of their characteristic dances, which, Cushing said, was unprecedented.

The squaws of the Governor's family put the long "living room" to rights, sweeping the floor and sprinkling it with water to lay the dust. Soon after dark the dancers entered; they were twelve in number, two being boys. The center men were naked with the exception of black breech-clouts of archaic style. The hair was worn naturally with a bunch of wild turkey feathers tied in front, and one of corn-husks over each ear. White bands were painted across the face at eyes and mouth. Each wore a collar or neckcloth of black woolen stuff. Broad white bands, one inch wide, were painted around the body at the navel, around the arms, the legs at mid-thighs and knees. Tortoise-shell rattles hung from the right knee. Blue woolen footless leggins were worn with low-cut moccasins, and in the right hand each waved a wand made of an ear of corn, trimmed with the plumage of the wild turkey and macaw. The others were arrayed in old cast-off American army clothing, and all wore white cotton night-caps, with corn-husks twisted into the hair at top of head and ears. Several wore, in addition to the tortoise-shell rattles, strings of brass sleigh-bells at knees. One was more grotesquely attired than the rest in a long India-rubber gossamer "over all" and a pair of goggles, painted white, over his eyes. His general "get-up" was a spirited take-off upon a Mexican priest. Another was a very good counterfeit of a young woman.

To the accompaniment of an oblong drum, and of the rattles and bells spoken of, they shuffled into the long room, crammed with spectators of both sexes, and of all sizes and ages. Their song was apparently a ludicrous reference to everything and everybody in sight, Cushing, Mendelev, and myself receiving special attention, to the uncontrolled merriment of the red-skinned listeners. I had taken my

station at one side of the room, seated upon the banquette, and having in front of me a rude bench or table upon which was a small coal-oil lamp. I suppose that in the halo diffused by the feeble light and in my "stained-glass attitude" I must have borne some resemblance to the pictures of saints hanging upon the walls of old Mexican churches; to such a fancied resemblance I at least attribute the performance which followed.

The dancers suddenly wheeled into line, threw themselves on their knees before my table, and with extravagant beatings of breast began an outlandish but faithful mockery of a Mexican Catholic congregation at vespers. One bawled out a parody upon the Pater Noster, another mumbled along in the manner of an old man reciting the rosary, while the fellow with the India-rubber coat jumped up and began a passionate exhortation or sermon, which for mimetic fidelity was inimitable. This kept the audience laughing with sore sides for some moments, until at a signal from the leader the dancers suddenly countermarched out of the room, in single file, as they had entered.

An interlude followed of ten minutes, during which the dusty floor was sprinkled by men who spat water forcibly from their mouths. The *Nehue-Cue* re-entered; this time two of their number were stark naked. Their singing was very peculiar and sounded like a chorus of chimney-sweeps, and their dance became a stiff-legged jump, with heels kept twelve inches apart. After they had ambled around the room two or three times, Cushing announced in the Zuni language that a "feast" was ready for them, at which they loudly roared their approbation and advanced to strike hands with the munificent "Americanos," addressing us in a funny gibberish of broken Spanish, English, and Zuni. They then squatted upon the ground and consumed with zest large "ollas" full of tea, and dishes of hard tack and sugar. As they were about finishing this a squaw entered, carrying an "olla" of urine, of which the filthy brutes drank heartily.

I refused to believe the evidence of my senses, and asked Cushing if that were really human urine. "Why, certainly," replied he, "and here comes more of it." This time, it was a large tin pail-full, not less than two gallons. I was standing by the squaw as she offered this strange and abominable refreshment. She made a motion with her hand to indicate to me that it was urine, and one of the old men repeated the Spanish word *meor* (to urinate), while my sense of smell demonstrated the truth of their statements.

The dancers swallowed great draughts, smacked their lips, and, amid the roaring merriment of the spectators, remarked that it was very, very good. The clowns were now upon their mettle, each trying to surpass his neighbors in feats of nastiness. One swallowed a fragment of corn-husk, saying he thought it very good and better than bread; his *vis-à-vis* attempted to chew and gulp down a piece of filthy rag. Another expressed regret that the dance had not been held out of doors, in one of the plazas; there they could show what they could do. There they always made it a point of honor to eat the excrement of men and dogs.

For my own part I felt satisfied with the omission, particularly as the room, stuffed with one hundred Zunis, had become so foul and filthy as to be almost unbearable. The dance, as good luck would have it, did not last many minutes, and we soon had a chance to run into the refreshing night air.

To this outline description of a disgusting rite I have little to add. The Zunis, in explanation, stated that the *Nehue-Cue* were a Medicine Order which held these dances from time to time to inure the stomachs of members to any kind of food, no matter how revolting. This statement may seem plausible enough when we understand that religion and medicine among primitive races are almost always one and the same thing, or, at least, so closely intertwined that it is a matter of difficulty to decide where one begins and the other ends.

Religion in its dramatic ceremonial preserves, to some extent, the history of the particular race in which it dwells. Among nations of high development, miracles, moralities, and passion plays have taught, down to our own day, in object lessons, the sacred history in which the spectators believed. Some analogous purpose may have been held in view by the first organizers of the urine dance. In their early history, the Zunis and other Pueblos suffered from constant warfare with savage antagonists and with each other. From the position of their villages, long sieges must of necessity have been sustained, in which sieges famine and disease, no doubt, were the allies counted upon by the investing forces. We may have in this abominable dance a tradition of the extremity to which the Zunis of the long ago were reduced at some unknown period. A similar catastrophe in the history of the Jews is intimated in II Kings, xviii, 27: "But Rab-shakeh said unto them: hath my master sent me to thy master, and to thee to speak these

words? hath he not sent me to the men which sit on the wall, that they may eat their own dung and drink their own piss with you?" In the course of my studies, I came across a reference to a very similar dance, occurring among one of the fanatical sects of the Arabian Bedouins, but the journal in which it was recorded, the *London Lancet*, I think, was unfortunately mislaid.

As illustrative of the tenacity with which such vile ceremonial, once adopted by a sect, will adhere to it and become ingrafted upon its life, long after the motives which have suggested or commended it have vanished in oblivion, let me quote a few lines from Max Muller's "Chips from a German Workshop," "Essay upon the Parsees," pp. 163, 164, Scribner's edition, 1869:

"The *Nirang* is the urine of cow, ox, or she-goat, and the rubbing of it over the face and hands is the second thing a Parsee does after getting out of bed. Either before applying the *Nirang* to the face and hands, or while it remains on the hands after being applied, he should not touch anything directly with his hands; but, in order to wash out the *Nirang*, he either asks somebody else to pour water on his hands, or resorts to the device of taking hold of the pot through the intervention of a piece of cloth, such as a handkerchief, or his *sudra*, i. e., his blouse. He first pours water on his hand, then takes the pot in that hand and washes his other hand, face, and feet." (Quoting from *Dad. abhai-Nadrosi's* Description of the Parsees.)

Continuing, Max Muller says: "Strange as this process of purification may appear, it becomes perfectly disgusting when we are told that women, after childbirth, have not only to undergo this sacred ablution, but actually to drink a little of the *Nirang*, and that the same rite is imposed on children at the time of their investiture with the *Sudra* and *Koshti*, the badges of the Zoroastrian faith."

